Task-based language teaching: sorting out the misunderstandings

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This paper begins by offering a definition of 'task' and by emphasizing that there is no single 'task-based teaching' approach. It then evaluates a number of criticisms of TBT, drawing on recent critiques by Widdowson, Seedhouse, Sheen, and Swan. It is argued that many of these criticisms stem from a fundamental misunderstanding of what a 'task' is, and of the theoretical rationales that inform task-based teaching. These criticisms also reflect a failure to acknowledge that multiple versions of task-based teaching exist. In particular, it is argued that task-based teaching need not be seen as an alternative to more traditional, form-focused approaches but can be used alongside them. The paper concludes with an examination of a number of genuine problems with implementing task-based teaching, as reflected in evaluation studies.

Keywords: tasks, task-based-language teaching, responding to critiques

本文开篇提出"任务"的定义，强调没有唯一的"任务型教学法"。通过评述 Widdowson, Seedhouse, Sheen 以及 Swan 近期对任务型教学法的批评，笔者指出此类批评源自于对"任务"的实质和任务型教学法的理论基础的误解，反映诸位批评者尚未认识到任务型教学法存在着不同的模式。笔者认为任务型教学法不应被视为传统的以形式为中心的教学法的替代方法，而是可以和传统教学法并用的方法。本文对一系列在任务型教学法实施过程中存在的问题进行了分析评论。

关键词： 任务　任务型教学法　回应对任务型教学法的批评

Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has attracted increasing attention from researchers and teacher educators since Candlin and Murphy's (1987) seminal collection of papers. This approach to language teaching – it cannot be said to constitute a distinct 'method' – has drawn extensively on research into L2 acquisition (i.e. SLA), as reflected in books by Crookes and Gass

(1993), Skehan (1998a), Ellis (2003), Garcia Mayo (2007), Eckerth and Siekmann (2008), and Samuda and Bygate (2008). It is worthwhile noting, however, that it is not just SLA researchers who are its advocates; teacher educators such as Prabhu (1987), Estaire and Zanon (1994), Willis (1996), and Nunan (1989; 2004) have also presented a strong case for it, drawing on both their own experience of language teaching and general educational theory. Samuda and Bygate (2008) make the connection with educational theory quite explicit:

> Many of the principles underlying the design and use of what we now call 'tasks' in second language pedagogy owe their genealogy to development in general education over the last century. (p. 18)

They showed how TBLT, with its emphasis on purposeful and functional language use, had its origins in Dewey's (1913) views about the importance of experience, relevance and '*intelligent effort*' for effective learning. There are also documented examples of actual TBLT, starting with Prabhu's (1987) account of the Communicational Language Teaching Project, and, more recently, in books reporting case studies of TBLT (e.g. Leaver and Willis 2004; Edwards and Willis 2005; Van den Branden 2006). TBLT has progressed well beyond theory into actual practice.

However, as is often the case when a 'new' approach receives the support of theorists and researchers in academe, resistance can set in. TBLT challenges mainstream views about language teaching in that it is based on the principle that language learning will progress most successfully if teaching aims simply to create contexts in which the learner's natural language learning capacity can be nurtured rather than making a systematic attempt to teach the language bit by bit (as in approaches based on a structural syllabus). Nor surprisingly, therefore, TBLT has been subjected to criticism – often strident – by those teachers and educators who favour a more traditional approach. Foremost among these critics are Sheen (1994; 2004) and Swan (2005). Other critics include Seedhouse (1999 and 2005), who has challenged TBLT on the grounds that 'task' does not constitute a valid construct around which to build a language teaching programme, and Widdowson (2003), who has argued that the criteria for defining tasks are overly loose and that TBLT over emphasizes 'authentic' language use.

TBLT has also been subjected to criticism on the basis of empirical studies of its implementation in different instructional settings. In particular, questions have been raised by Li (1998), Carless (2004), and Butler (2005), among others, as to whether TBLT is practical in Asian countries, where teachers are likely to adhere to a philosophy of teaching that is radically different to that underlying TBLT, and where they also face practical problems such as limited second language proficiency and the washback from tests they need to prepare their students for.

In this paper, I would like to mount a defence of TBLT. To this end I will address a number of criticisms emanating from the theoretical critiques. I will argue that many of these are based on misunderstandings of what advocates of TBLT actually propose. I will also examine, much more sympathetically, the problems of implementation identified in the evaluation studies of innovative TBLT projects. First, though, I need to provide a quick sketch of what TBLT entails.

Task-based language teaching: key precepts

TBLT proposes that the primary unit for both designing a language programme and for planning individual lessons should be a 'task'. Various definitions of a 'task' have been provided (see Ellis 2003: 4–5), but most of these indicate that for a language-teaching activity to be a 'task' it must satisfy the following criteria:

1. The primary focus should be on 'meaning' (by which is meant that learners should be mainly concerned with processing the semantic and pragmatic meaning of utterances).
2. There should be some kind of 'gap' (i.e. a need to convey information, to express an opinion or to infer meaning).
3. Learners should largely have to rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic) in order to complete the activity.
4. There is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language (i.e. the language serves as the means for achieving the outcome, not as an end in its own right).

On the basis of such criteria, a distinction can be made between a 'task' and 'a situational grammar exercise'. Whereas the latter may satisfy criteria (2) and (3), it does not satisfy (1), as the learners know that the main purpose of the activity is to practice correct language rather than to process messages for meaning, nor does it satisfy (4), as the outcome is simply the use of correct language. In making this distinction, however, I do not wish to suggest that situational grammar exercises are of no pedagogic value; I simply want to make the distinction clear.

Tasks can be 'unfocused' or 'focused'. Unfocused tasks are tasks designed to provide learners with opportunities for using language in general communicatively. Focused tasks are tasks designed to provide opportunities for communicating using some specific linguistic feature (typically a grammatical structure). However, focused tasks must still satisfy the four criteria stated above. For this reason the target linguistic feature of a focused task is 'hidden' (i.e. learners are not told explicitly what the feature is). Thus, a focused task can still be distinguished from a 'situational grammar exercise', as in the latter learners are made aware of what feature they are

supposed to be producing. In other words, learners are expected to orient differently to a focused task and a situational grammar exercise. Again, I do not wish to suggest that focused tasks are of greater pedagogic value than situational grammar exercise.

The distinction between 'task' and 'situational grammar exercise' underlies another important distinction, namely that between 'task-based' and 'task-supported' language teaching. The former requires a syllabus consisting of unfocused tasks; that is, the content of the instructional programme is specified in terms of the tasks to be completed (as in Prabhu 1987). The latter utilizes a structural syllabus and typically involves 'PPP' (presentation–practice–production), with the final stage taken up with what is often referred to as a 'task' but more correctly constitutes a 'situational grammar exercise'. According to Widdowson (2003), task-supported language teaching is likely to result in 'encoded usage rather than realization as purposeful use' (p. 119). However, as Widdowson goes on to argue, such teaching is not to be dismissed if it can inspire '*engagement*'. Contrivance and language display may have their place in language teaching. Thus, again, in distinguishing between task-based and task-supported language teaching I do not intend to present the former as desirable and the latter as undesirable. A case can be made for both.

One further distinction needs to be made. Tasks can also be 'input-providing' or 'output-prompting'. Input-providing tasks engage learners in listening or reading, while output-prompting tasks engage them in speaking or writing. Thus, a task can provide opportunities for communicating in any of the four language skills. Many tasks are integrative; they involve two or more skills.

TBLT, like other kinds of language teaching, entails both design and methodology. That is, decisions need to be taken regarding which type of tasks to include in a course, what the content of the tasks will be, and, crucially, how to sequence the tasks so as to best facilitate learning. Methodological decisions concern how to structure a task-based lesson and what type of participatory structure to employ. A task-based lesson can involve three phases (the pre-task phase, the main task phase, and the post-task phase), although only one of these (the main task phase) is obligatory. Tasks can be performed in a whole-class context, in pairs, in groups, or by learners working individually.

Finally, it is important to recognize that there is no single way of doing TBLT. Table 1 distinguishes three approaches to TBLT – Long's (1985), Skehan's (1998a), and my own (Ellis 2003). I have described these approaches in terms of five characteristics:

(1) the provision of opportunities for natural language use (what Widdowson (2003) refers to as 'authenticity');
(2) learner-centredness (as manifested in the centrality of small group work);
(3) focus-on-form (whether the approach includes devices for focusing learners attention on form while they are communicating);

(4) the kind of task (i.e. whether unfocused or focused); and
(5) the rejection of traditional approaches to language teaching (e.g. PPP).

Table 1. A comparison of three approaches to TBLT

Characteristic	Long (1985)	Skehan (1998a)	Ellis (2003)
Natural language use	Yes	Yes	Yes
Learner-centredness	Yes	Yes	Not necessarily
Focus on form	Yes – through corrective feedback	Yes – mainly through pre-task	Yes – in all phases of a TBLT lesson
Tasks	Yes – unfocused and focused	Yes – unfocused	Yes – unfocused and focused
Rejection of traditional approaches	Yes	Yes	No

The only characteristics that all three approaches share are (1) – they all emphasize the role of tasks in creating contexts for natural language use – and (3), focus on form. However, differences exist as to how attention to form is to be achieved, with Long emphasizing corrective feedback, Skehan task design and pre-task planning, and myself a variety of ways in all three phases of a task-based lesson. Differences in the three approaches are evident with regard to (2) (i.e. I do not see group work as an essential characteristic), (4) (i.e. Skehan favours just unfocused tasks whereas Long and I myself also see a role for focused tasks), and (5) (Long and Skehan view traditional structural teaching as theoretically indefensible while I see it as complementary to TBLT). As we will shortly see, many of the misunderstandings about TBLT derive in part from the tendency of its critics to view it as monolithic, rather than quite variable.

With this background to TBLT completed, I will now address a number of misunderstandings in the critiques of TBLT advanced by Sheen, Swan, Seedhouse, and Widdowson.

Misunderstandings about TBLT

The misunderstandings I will consider have arisen for a number of reasons, but two in particular: misrepresentations of the theoretical rationale for TBLT and a failure to acknowledge the differences that exist among advocates of TBLT (as shown in Table 1). I shall consider the following misunderstandings:

(1) The definition of a 'task' is not sufficiently clear to distinguish it from other kinds of instructional activities.
(2) Tasks prioritize pragmatic meaning and neglect semantic meaning.

(3) The interaction that results from tasks is often impoverished and thus cannot constitute an adequate context for L2 acquisition.

(4) It is not possible to predict what kinds of language use will result from the performance of a task, and thus it is not possible to ensure adequate coverage of the target language in a task-based course.

(5) Because there is no underlying grammar syllabus, TBLT cannot ensure adequate coverage of grammar;

(6) Attention to form in TBLT is limited to corrective feedback in order to ensure minimal interruption of the performance of a task.

(7) Attention to grammar in the post-task phase is limited to conscious-raising activities (i.e. there are no production practice activities).

(8) The theoretical rationale for TBLT addresses only grammar, ignoring vocabulary and pronunciation.

(9) TBLT emphasizes output and thus fails to ensure that learners are exposed to rich input.

(10) The role of the teacher in TBLT is limited to that of a 'manager' or 'facilitator' of communicative activities.

(11) TBLT is only suited to 'acquisition-rich' contexts.

(12) There are insufficient empirical findings to support the theoretical rationale for TBLT or to show that TBLT is superior to traditional approaches.

I will now consider each of these misunderstandings.

1. The definition of a 'task'

Widdowson (2003) argued that 'the criteria that are proposed as defining features of tasks are . . . so loosely formulated . . . that they do not distinguish tasks from other more traditional classroom activities' (p. 126). Widdowson reached this conclusion on the basis of a discussion of the definition of a task provided by Skehan (1998b). Skehan indentified four criteria:

- Meaning is primary.
- There is a goal that needs to be worked towards.
- The activity is outcome-evaluated.
- There is a real-world relationship.

Widdowson's critique of these criteria is not without merit. He is right to point out that Skehan's use of the term 'meaning' is indeterminate as it does not distinguish semantic and pragmatic meaning, that it is not clear what Skehan means by 'goal', and that the nature of the 'real-world relationship' is not specified. However, his dismissal of the third criterion (relating to the outcome of the task) is less convincing. Widdowson argues that a successful outcome to a task may not result in any learning if only minimal language is

involved. However, this misses the point, as the aim of a definition of task is not to specify what the learning outcomes are but merely to specify what kind of instructional activity a task is.

The definition of a task has proved problematic. This is evident in the discussion of various definitions to be found in Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (1991), Ellis (2003), and Samuda and Bygate (2008). There are, however, more precise definitions of 'task' than Skehan's available, and if Widdowson wishes to claim that the defining criteria are 'loosely formulated' it is requisite that he consider a range of definitions, rather than limit himself to one and then generalize from that. The definition I provided above, for example, makes it clear that tasks aim to involve learners in processing both semantic and pragmatic meaning. By emphasizing the importance of a 'gap' to motivate the 'goal' of a task and the need for learners to use their own linguistic resources (rather than simply manipulating texts they are provided with), this definition, I would argue, is sufficiently tight to distinguish activities like 'completing a family tree' and 'agreeing to give advice to the writer of a letter to an agony aunt' (examples from Skehan 1998a) from traditional language learning activities (what I have called 'exercises') such as 'filling the blanks in sentences', or even situational grammar activities.

Widdowson also seems to be guilty of a more fundamental misunderstanding of a task. He argued, quite correctly, that many of the tasks mentioned by Skehan are unlikely to figure in the real life of people. Widdowson appears to assume that a defining characteristic of a task is that it should be 'authentic'. However, as Bachman (1990) pointed out, we can distinguish two types of authenticity – situational authenticity and interactional authenticity. Widdowson obviously has only the former in mind, but even a cursory reading of the task-based literature should make it clear that what is important is interactional authenticity. That is, some tasks may achieve situational authenticity (although, as Widdowson noted, given the exigencies of the classroom context this is unlikely), but *all* tasks are designed to instigate the same kind of interactional processes (such as the negotiation of meaning, scaffolding, inferencing, and monitoring) that arise in naturally occurring language use.

2. Semantic vs. pragmatic meaning

A second, related criticism that Widdowson makes of TBLT is that tasks prioritize pragmatic meaning and neglect semantic meaning. The former refers to the way language is used in natural contexts of use; the latter refers to the notional meanings encoded in the lexis and grammar of a language. To borrow Widdowson's example, the sentence:

I am walking to the door.

if said while the speaker walks to the door, is pragmatically inappropriate (unless the intention is to infer some additional meaning such as 'Look, my hip's not so bad after all') but successfully illustrates one of the semantic meanings of the present continuous tense. Widdowson's point is that what he refers to as structural-oral-situational teaching (and what I mean by 'traditional' teaching) employs such sentences as the means for teaching the semantic meanings of the linguistic code and, as a consequence, fails to address pragmatic meaning. In contrast, TBLT, according to Widdowson, requires learners to process pragmatic meaning but fails to provide them with the situational clues needed to acquire semantic meaning.

Given that learners need to master both pragmatic and semantic meaning, it would seem that Widdowson is arguing for a combination of TBLT and traditional approaches such as the structural-oral-situational approach. Indeed, he states that a 'preferable procedure is to give critical attention to the basic tenets of SOS and TBI to establish where they correspond and where they might complement each other' (p. 129). This is a position I have also taken (see Ellis 2002). However, the general tenor of Widdowson's essay is clearly dismissive of TBLT.

There are two problems with Widdowson's argument. The first is the mistaken claim that TBLT fails to address semantic meaning. It is not difficult, for example, to think of a task that would create a context for the use of the present continuous tense to express ongoing activity. A spot-the-difference task that showed people performing different actions would require one participant to describe these actions in order to see if they were the same or different from the actions people were performing in his/her partner's picture. Such a task surely requires attention to both pragmatic and semantic meaning. The second problem lies in Widdowson's assumption that contriving contexts to teach specific grammatical structures such as the present continuous tense enables learners to acquire these structures. Widdowson provides no evidence that they do. The fundamental problem with a structural approach to language teaching of the kind implicit in the structural-oral-situational approach is that it cannot easily take account of the learner's own built-in syllabus (Corder 1967) and the processes of form–function mapping that lead to this. TBLT was developed as a way of ensuring that instructional and acquisitional processes were properly matched (see Long and Crookes 1993).

3. Impoverished interaction

A common objection to TBLT is that learners' performance of tasks will result only in samples of impoverished language use that are of little acquisitional value. This was implicit in Widdowson's criticism regarding the failure of tasks to address semantic meaning. This criticism has been made more explicitly by Seedhouse (1999), who claimed that the performance of tasks is

Table 2. An example of an impoverished task-based interaction (from Lynch 1989)

L1:	What?
L2:	Stop.
L3:	Dot?
L4:	Dot?
L5:	Point?
L6:	Dot?
LL:	Point, point, yeh.
L1:	Point?
L5:	Small point.
L3:	Dot

characterized by indexicalized and pidginized language as a result of the learners' over-reliance on context and the limitations of their linguistic resources. In support of this claim he cited the interaction from Lynch shown in Table 2, where the learners are engaged in performing an information-gap activity that requires them to describe simple diagrams to each other. Seedhouse argued that such interactions are likely to promote fossilization rather than acquisition.

There is no doubt that such tasks can result in the kind of interaction shown in Table 2. But this does not justify a dismissal of task-based instruction, for two reasons. First, if the learners are beginners, then engaging in such interaction might in fact be beneficial, encouraging them to develop the capacity to make use of their limited resources and thus helping them to develop their strategic competence. Nor can the acquisitional potential of such interactions be dismissed. In Ellis (2003) I argued that the interaction in Table 2 manifests a number of the qualities of the 'progressive discourse' that Wells (1999) claimed were required for collaborative knowledge building. It is clear, for example, that the participants are working towards a 'common understanding' (i.e. the meaning of *dot*) and that they frame questions in ways that help them to expand their knowledge base (i.e. by proposing synonyms for *dot*). As a result, they arrive at the collectively valid proposition that a *dot* is a 'small point'). Thus, there would seem to be a clear 'knowledge artefact' that results from this interaction (i.e. the meaning of *dot*).

The second reason for rejecting Seedhouse's argument is simply that the nature of the interactions that take place in TBLT will depend on three factors: the proficiency level of the students, the design features of the task, and the method of implementation. More advanced learners performing more complex tasks will engage in more linguistically rich interactions, especially if they are given the opportunity to engage in pre-task and on-line planning (Yuan and Ellis 2003). There is plenty of evidence from the task-based literature (see e.g. the studies of the effects of planning on task-based performance in Ellis 2005) to show that tasks can result in highly complex language use.

One of the aims of TBLT is, in fact, to create contexts in which learners can experience what it means to communicate at different stages of their development – using whatever resources at their disposal. Inevitably, with beginners, the interactions will be limited, but this does not mean that they are of no pedagogic value.

4. Task-as-workplan vs. task-as-process

An important and certainly valid distinction is that between the task-as-workplan and the task-as-process (Breen 1989). The relevance of this distinction for TBLT is that if there is no correspondence between the task-as-workplan and the task-as-process, it will not be possible to predict what kinds of language use will result from the performance of tasks, and thus not possible to ensure adequate coverage in a task-based course.

There is plenty of evidence to demonstrate that the task-as-workplan does not always result in the anticipated use of language. This is true of both unfocused and focused tasks. Coughlan and Duff (1994), drawing on the tenets of sociocultural theory, showed that the 'activity' that results from a focused 'task' varied from learner to learner and also from performance to performance of the task by the same learner. Seedhouse (2005) argued that the discrepancy between the predicted and actual language use resulting from a task was so great that a task could only be defined in terms of the language processes that resulted from its performance, and that therefore it was impossible to plan a language course based on tasks-as-workplans. The problem becomes even more acute with focused tasks. It is difficult to design production tasks that make the use of a specific target feature 'essential', and not easy to design tasks that make them 'useful'; at best we can hope to make the use of the target feature 'natural' (Loschky and Bley-Vroman 2003). Learners are adroit at using their strategic competence to get round having to use a linguistic feature they do not know or cannot access easily.

This is a serious problem. If Seedhouse is correct, then it is clearly difficult if not impossible to use 'task' as the unit for designing courses. But Seedhouse is not correct. First, while the relationship between task-as-workplan and task-as-process is not a perfect one, it does exist. Both Skehan (2001) and Robinson (2007) have shown that specific design features affect the accuracy, complexity, and fluency of the language that results. Table 3 summarizes Skehan's findings. It shows, for example, that if the information comprising the task-as-workplan has a well-defined structure, then the resulting language is markedly more fluent, whereas if the outcome required of the task is complex, the resulting language is also more complex. Foster and Skehan (1996), and others, have also shown that implementation variables such as planning also influence the way a task is performed in predictable ways. Skehan's work demonstrates convincingly that it is possible to design and implement tasks in ways that will lead learners to

Table 3. Effects of task design features on fluency, complexity, and accuracy

Task characteristic	Accuracy	Complexity	Fluency
Familiarity of information	No effect	No effect	Slightly greater
Dialogic vs. monologic	Greater	Slightly greater	Lower
Degree of structure	No effect	No effect	Greater
Complexity of outcome	No effect	Greater	No effect
Transformations	No effect	Planned condition leads to greater	No effect

prioritize different aspects of language. Also, studies of focused tasks have shown that in at least some cases it is possible to design tasks that will result in the required use of the target structure (see Ellis 2003: ch. 5). For example, Mackey (1999) has used tasks to successfully elicit the use of question forms.

Seedhouse is also wrong for another reason. His claim about the unsuitability of 'task' as a unit for designing a course is based entirely on his analysis of output-prompting tasks. But tasks can also be input-providing. In this case, it is obviously much easier to ensure a close match between the target language to be selected for attention and the language that learners actually process when they perform the task. Critics of TBLT frequently make the mistake of assuming that a task is invariably a speaking task. The problem perceived by Seedhouse disappears once it is recognized that tasks can involve listening and reading.

5. Inadequate coverage of grammar

A common complaint – and indeed this is really what underlies Widdowson's criticisms we considered earlier – is that a task-based syllabus affords inadequate coverage of grammar. Sheen (2003) claimed that in task-based language teaching there is 'no grammar syllabus', and went on to argue that proponents of TBLT 'generally offer little more than a brief list of suggestions regarding the selection and presentation of new language'. In a similar vein, Swan (2005) insisted that TBLT 'outlaws' the grammar syllabus. Strong words!

To address this criticism it is important to make a distinction between a task-based *syllabus* and task-based *teaching*. But in neither case is it accurate to claim that grammar has no place.

A task-based syllabus can comprise both unfocused and focused tasks. As promulgated by Long and Crookes (1993), the primary units are unfocused tasks. If the syllabus comprises entirely unfocused tasks, then grammar indeed has no place. But if the syllabus also incorporates focused tasks, then it will also be necessary to stipulate the linguistic content of these

tasks, and this typically involves specifying the grammar to be taught. It is therefore possible to conceive of a 'pure' task-based syllabus consisting entirely of unfocused tasks (and this is what Sheen and Swan must have had in mind when they complained about the lack of grammar). But it is also possible to conceive of a grammar-oriented task-based syllabus consisting of focused tasks. A third type of task-based syllabus is also possible – a hybrid one that consists of a mixture of focused and unfocused tasks. In each of these syllabuses, however, the primary unit will be 'task' as I have defined it earlier in this paper. Various arguments can be advanced for preferring a pure task-based syllabus, a grammar-oriented task syllabus, or a hybrid task syllabus. It is true that some advocates of TBLT (e.g. Willis 1996; Long and Crookes 1993; Skehan 1998b) have generally opted for a pure task-based syllabus, but others, such as myself (Ellis 2003) and Samuda and Bygate (2008), have acknowledged that 'grammar' can have a place in a task-based syllabus.

'Teaching', of course, involves more than just a syllabus; it also includes methodology (i.e. the means by which the syllabus is implemented). When we look at the methodology of task-based teaching, the claim that there is no grammar is seen to be fundamentally mistaken. All advocates of TBLT see a role for grammar methodologically. Potentially, attention to form (including grammatical form) can figure in all three phases of a task-based lesson (i.e. the pre-task phase, the main task phase, and the post-task phase), although differences exist among advocates as to what is the preferred approach. Willis (1996), for example, argued that attention to form should be restricted to the post-task phase, Long (2006) proposed that it is best incorporated into the main-task phase in the form of recasts, Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001) showed that teachers engage in extensive focus on form in the main-task phase both pre-emptively and reactively using a variety of devices, while Estaire and Zanon (1994) suggested that the pre-task phase can incorporate some teaching of grammar. Furthermore, advocates of TBLT do not view attention to form as an optional element of TBLT but as necessary to ensure 'noticing', which Schmidt (1994) viewed as a requisite for acquisition to take place.

Thus, whether TBLT is viewed in terms of syllabus or methodology, it is clearly incorrect to claim that it 'outlaws grammar'. Grammar may not be central to TBLT, but it has an important place within it.

6. Attention to form

The term 'focus on form' was coined by Long (1991) to stand in contrast to 'focus on forms'. The latter refers to traditional language teaching based on a structural syllabus. 'Focus on form' refers to teaching where learners' attention is focused on form in the context of communicative activities. Thus, focus on form is one of the main ways for handling grammar in

TBLT. This has led to another criticism – that 'the only grammar to be dealt with (in TBLT) is that which causes a problem in communication' (Sheen 2003).

This criticism might be justified if the only version of TBLT was Long's, but, as I have already pointed out, this is not the case. Attention to form can occur in a variety of ways – not just through 'focus on form' as defined by Long. Nor is it correct to claim that 'focus on form' is restricted to occasions where there is a 'problem in communication' – i.e. to what Long has called the 'negotiation of meaning'. Attention to form can arise didactically as well as communicatively during a performance of a task, as illustrated by this example (Ellis et al. 2001) from a task-based lesson:

> T: What were you doing?
> S: I was in pub
> (2)
> S: I was in pub
> T: In the pub?
> S: Yeh and I was drinking beer with my friend.

It is clear that there is no communication problem here – the teacher understands what the student has said but nevertheless goes ahead with a partial recast ('In the pub?'). Ellis et al. (2001) provided evidence to suggest that in communicative adult ESL classes this kind of didactic focus on form occurs more frequently than what they called 'conversational' focus on form.

An excellent example of how teachers can switch from conversational to didactic focus on form can be found in Samuda's (2001) account of a task-based lesson. The 'Things-in-Pocket' task that this lesson was based on asked students to speculate about the identity of a person when shown the contents of this person's pockets. This was a focused task designed to afford opportunities for the learners to use epistemic modals. Samuda documented how the teacher commenced by attempting to interweave the target structure into the talk aroused by the task by means of recasts, and when this failed, resorted to a more explicit and didactic treatment of the target structure. If Sheen had read Samuda's paper, it is difficult to see how he could continue to argue that the only grammar dealt with is that which causes a communication problem.

7. Consciousness-raising tasks

Sheen (2003) also claims that in TBLT any post-task grammar work is supposed to take the form of grammar-problem solving tasks (i.e. consciousness-raising (CR) tasks). This criticism probably derives from my own advocacy of CR tasks (see Ellis 1991; 1993). I contrasted CR activities with practice activities, and argued that the former are more compatible with

what is known about L2 acquisition in that they are directed at explicit rather than implicit knowledge and, as such, do not run up against the problem of trying the match the instruction to the learner's built-in syllabus, as this relates only to implicit knowledge. I also argued that CR tasks double up as communicative tasks, as 'grammar' becomes a topic to talk about while also meeting the other criteria for tasks as discussed on p. 223.

However, although I would certainly see CR activities as an ideal way of providing post-task grammar work, especially for adults who have achieved intermediate proficiency in the L2, and one which may also work for children (see Bouffard and Sarkar 2008), I certainly would not claim they are the only way of treating grammar in the post-task phase. In Ellis (2003) I identified a number of ways in which grammar can be addressed in this phase of the lesson, including direct explicit instruction and traditional practice type exercises. Other supporters of TBLT (e.g. Willis 1996) have likewise proposed a variety of options for the post-task phase.

Sheen is guilty of generalizing on the basis of one writer's views about the post-task phase (my own), and even in this respect has not accurately represented this writer's stance regarding how grammar can be dealt with in the post-task phase of a task-based lesson.

8. Vocabulary and pronunciation

It has also been claimed that 'the theoretical rationale for TBLT is typically limited to the acquisition of grammar and that vocabulary and phonology are ignored (Swan 2005). This criticism seems to have arisen over a misunderstanding of the term 'focus on form', namely that 'form' refers exclusively to grammar. This, however, is not how researchers of TBLT have operationalized focus on form. Williams' (1999) study of learner-initiated focus on form in collaborative group work found that the type of form that the learners focused on was 'overwhelmingly lexical'. Ellis et al. (2001) reported that out of 429 focus-on-form episodes that they identified in some 12 hours of TBLT in two adult ESL classes, 159 addressed lexical problems and 76 pronunciation problems. There were 163 episodes related to grammar. Thus, in this study, the total focus-on-form episodes for vocabulary and pronunciation combined exceeded that for grammar. In a follow-up study, Loewen (2005) found an even greater emphasis on vocabulary and pronunciation in 12 adult ESL classes involving 32 hours of TBLT; 43 per cent of the form-focused episodes addressed vocabulary and 22 per cent pronunciation, while 33 per cent addressed grammar.

Not only is Swan wrong in claiming that theorists of TBLT ignore vocabulary and pronunciation, but he is himself guilty of ignoring the very substantial evidence from empirical studies of TBLT that vocabulary and, to a lesser extent, pronunciation receive frequent attention in task-based lessons, whether these are teacher-led or involve small group work.

9. Output- vs. input-based task-based language teaching

Perhaps one of the most astonishing criticisms levelled at TBLT is that it 'provides learners with substantially less new language than "traditional" approaches' (Swan 2005). Swan went on to claim:

> In the tiny corpus of a year's task-based input, even some basic structures may not occur often, much core vocabulary is likely to be absent, and many other lexical items will appear only once or twice.

One wonders how Swan proposes to measure the quantity of 'new language' that learners are exposed to in traditional and task-based approaches. Is he referring to the materials found in coursebooks or to the interactions that occur in classrooms? And what exactly does he mean by 'new language'?

It would seem that Swan's criticism is predicated on the assumption that tasks must inevitably involve interaction and production. But, as I pointed out earlier, tasks can also be 'input-based' (i.e. involve listening or reading). In Ellis (2003) I devoted a whole chapter to listening tasks, pointing out that they provide a means of adjusting the input to the learners' level in order to make it comprehensible, and also reviewing studies (e.g. Loschky 1994; Ellis, Tanaka, and Yamazaki 1994; Ellis and Heimbach 1997) that have shown how what I call 'listen-and-do tasks' can be enriched with 'new' vocabulary in ways that foster acquisition. I concluded that 'the research based on listen-and-do tasks has shown that such tasks are effective both for practising listening comprehension and as a means for presenting new linguistic material to students'. Reading tasks also afford opportunities for exposing learners to rich input. Indeed, extensive reading activities can be viewed as tasks. Again there is research to show that incidental vocabulary acquisition occurs as a result of extensive reading (see e.g. Dupuy and Krashen 1993).

A brief study of popular 'traditional' course materials is likely to reveal the poverty of the input they provide – indeed, in many coursebooks for low-level learners, more space is given over to pictures than to linguistic input! I would argue that a task-based course is capable of providing much greater exposure to the target language, including 'new' language, than a traditional course.

10. The role of the teacher

According to Swan (2005), task-based language teaching promotes learner-centredness at the expense of teacher-directed instruction. Swan comments: 'the thrust of TBLT is to cast the teacher in the role of manager and facilitator of communicative activity rather than an important source of new language.' This criticism assumes, rightly in my view, that there is a place for teacher-centred activities in language teaching, helpful though small group work

may be in creating contexts for the kinds of language use that will promote acquisition. In many instructional contexts, the teacher is the major source of input.

However, Swan is mistaken in assuming that the teacher is limited to managing and facilitating students' performance of tasks in TBLT. First, it should be noted that some versions of TBLT are in fact entirely teacher-centred. Prabhu (1987), for instance, distinguished between a pre-task, which was to be performed by the teacher in lock-step fashion with the whole class, and the main task, which was to be performed by students individually. He argued that it was only the teacher who could ensure the 'good models' of English needed to promote interlanguage development, and that 'sustained interaction between learners is likely to provide much less opportunity for system-revision' (p. 81) and, in fact, was likely to result in pidginized use of the L2 and concomitant interlanguage fossilization. Prabhu described the kind of teacher talk that took place in the Communicational Language Teaching project and that he argued was needed for interlanguage development:

> in the classroom, the teacher controlled the complexity of his or her language in more or less the same way as an adult does in speaking to a child – avoiding or paraphrasing what he or she felt might be too difficult, repeating statements, and speaking slowly when there seemed to be difficulties of understanding. (p. 57)

Clearly, this involves the teacher in much more than managing tasks. Nor does it correspond to what Swan had in mind when he talked of the teacher as 'facilitator'. Rather, it places the teacher in the role of skilled communicator – surely a necessary role for any kind of teaching. Swan's assumption that TBLT necessarily involves small group work also ignores the fact many tasks are input-based (e.g. listening tasks) and so do not involve learner production.

In just about all versions of TBLT, including those that prioritize group work, the teacher is much more than a manager and facilitator of tasks. The need to direct learners' attention to form during the performance of the task requires the teacher to engage in various types of pre-emptive and reactive focus on form. There is now a rich literature documenting how teachers respond to learner errors in TBLT, for example. This shows that they adopt both implicit and explicit corrective strategies, at times intervening very directly to 'teach' about some item of language (as in Samuda's (2001) 'Things-in-Pocket' lesson referred to above).

Swan's description of the teacher's role also ignores the fact that TBLT can include a pre-task and post-task phase, where opportunities arise for the explicit teaching of language. Thus, while it is true that TBLT requires teachers to function as a manager and facilitator, it is also the case that it requires them to adopt other more 'teacherly' roles of the kind that Swan

feels are needed. In this respect, TBLT is no different from any other instructional approach. Also, like other types of teaching, TBLT can be both learner- and teacher-centred.

11. Acquisition-rich vs. acquisition-poor environments

A commonly held view – one voiced by Swan (2005) – is that beginner learners need to be taught grammar because without it they will not be able to communicate; in particular, they will not be able to shift attention to code features in interaction because they know so little basic grammar that they cannot produce discourse to shift from. A corollary of this brief is that TBLT is only suited to 'acquisition-rich' environments (e.g. where learners have access to the target language in the wider community) and is not suited to 'acquisition-poor' environments (such as many 'foreign' teaching contexts), where a more structured approach is required to ensure that learners develop the grammatical resources for communicating.

There are a number of problems with this line of argument. First, it assumes that TBLT requires production right from the start – when learners are beginners. I have already pointed out that TBLT can be input-providing as well as output-prompting, and with beginners the appropriate approach would clearly be one that emphasizes listening and reading tasks. There is plenty of evidence (see e.g. Ellis 1999 for a review of studies) to show that input-based approaches enable learners to develop not only the ability to comprehend input but also the grammatical resources they will need to speak and write. Prabhu (1987) provides examples of how TBLT can work with beginners by exploiting input-based tasks.

A second problem lies in the assumption that learners need grammar in order to be able to communicate. This is clearly wrong. The very early stages of L2 acquisition (as evidenced in learner production) are agrammatical. Klein and Perdue (1997) have shown that the starting point is what they call the 'pre-basic variety'. This is characterized by nominal utterance organization. Production at this stage involves scaffolded utterances (i.e. utterances constructed over more than one turn) and is context-dependent. Grammaticalization takes place only very gradually, and it is typically some time before finite verb organization appears in what they term the 'post-basic variety'. In fact, everything that we know about how learners acquire grammar show that it is a gradual and dynamic process. It is precisely this that TBLT seeks to accommodate. From this perspective, teaching grammar to beginners is of little use unless the aim is simply to develop their explicit knowledge of grammatical rules.

It would follow from this argument that TBLT might in fact be better suited to 'acquisition-poor' environments than to 'acquisition-rich ones'. In situations where learners have access to communicative contexts outside the classroom, there may be a case for teaching grammar as a way of preventing

the stabilization that often occurs in interlanguage development after learners have achieved a basic ability to communicate in everyday situations. In situations where such communicative opportunities are not found (e.g. for learners of English in many European and Asian countries), there is an obvious need to provide them inside the classroom. TBLT is a means for achieving this.

In short, TBLT caters to what we know about the way that beginners learn an L2. It aims to create a context in which grammar can be acquired gradually and dynamically while at the same time fostering the ability to use this grammar in communication. It is ideally suited to 'acquisition-poor' environments.

12. 'Legislation by hypothesis'

Both Sheen (2003) and Swan (2005) argue that there is no empirical evidence either to support the hypotheses that construct the theoretical rationale for task-based teaching or to demonstrate that this approach to teaching is superior to traditional 'focus-on-forms' approaches. Swan claims that SLA researchers are guilty of 'legislation by hypothesis'. He lists four hypotheses that he claims underlie TBLT which he maintains are not supported by research.

It is incorrect to claim that there have been no comparative evaluations of TBLT. Neither Sheen nor Swan makes any reference to Prabhu (1987) and Beretta and Davies's (1985) evaluation of this project in India. Their evaluation sought to compare the learning that resulted from the Communicational Language Teaching Project and traditional language teaching (the 'structural-oral-situational approach' – a version of PPP). In the attempt to ensure that the evaluation was fair, Beretta and Davies included tests that favoured each approach as well as method-neutral tests. The findings were as follows:

• In the tests favouring the traditional group, this group did best.
• In the tests favouring the task-based group, this group did best.
• In the neutral tests (e.g. a contextualized grammar test; dictation; listening/reading comprehension), the task-based group did best.

On balance, this evaluation suggests that TBLT is superior to traditional teaching. The task-based group demonstrated that they had acquired both some grammar and the capacity to utilize their linguistic knowledge communicatively. However, Beretta and Davies were careful to note that conducting a post hoc evaluation of this kind was problematic. This is perhaps one reason why there have been no further evaluations of this kind. The difficulties of conducting global method comparisons are well known (see Allwright 1988).

There are, however, plenty of small-scale studies demonstrating that task-based learning does result in acquisition. For example, in an experimental

Table 4. Research supporting four SLA hypotheses

Hypothesis	Research
The online hypothesis	Online attention to form does result in learning (Mackey and Philp 1998; Mackey 1999).
The noticing hypothesis	Learners do pay attention to linguistic form and this can result in learning (e.g. Mackey, Gass, and McDonough 2001; Y. Sheen 2004).
The teachability hypothesis	There is a substantial body of research that shows that L2 acquisition involves both an order and sequence of acquisition (e.g. Ellis 1994; Bardovi Harlig 2000) and that this cannot be easily altered through instruction (e.g. Ellis 1989).

study, Ellis et al. (1994) investigated the effects of Japanese learners' acquisition of English vocabulary in a listen-and-do task. They showed that, even when focused primarily on meaning – as required by a task – they were able to acquire new words and maintain what they had learned over time. Other studies (e.g. Mackey 1999) have shown that performing tasks can also assist the acquisition of grammar.

In order to refute Swan's claims about legislation by hypothesis, I have listed in Table 4 the four hypotheses that he considered together with some of the research that has addressed each hypothesis. The online hypothesis states that acquisition is fostered when learners attend to form in the context of ongoing communication (i.e. when they are primarily focused on meaning). This has been demonstrated in a number of studies – for example, Mackey and Philp (1998), who showed that learners are able to attend to grammatical features in recasts provided they are developmentally ready to do so. The noticing hypothesis claims that noticing (i.e. paying conscious attention to linguistic form) is necessary for acquisition to take place. A number of studies (e.g. Y. Sheen 2004) have shown that learners frequently repair their errors following the teacher's corrective feedback on the performance in a task, demonstrating that they must have noticed the correct form. The teachability hypothesis proposes that learners will only be able to acquire those features for which they are developmentally ready. A number of studies (e.g. Pica 1983; Ellis 1989) have shown that the natural order of acquisition cannot be subverted by instruction, and that learners can only acquire those features for which they are developmentally ready. Swan is correct in claiming that these hypotheses provide a theoretical rationale for TBLT. He is incorrect in claiming that there is no empirical support for them.

There is clearly a need to demonstrate the efficacy of TBLT. SLA researchers have been able to show that incidental learning does occur as a result of performing tasks, and have gone some way to identifying the conditions that facilitate this. Clearly, though, this research is still insufficient to convince doubters like Sheen and Swan. It probably always will be. It is

worth noting, however, that the case for TBLT does not rest solely on SLA. As I noted in the introduction to this paper, TBLT draws on a variety of theories, including those drawn from general education. Thus, even if Swan is right and SLA researchers are guilty of 'legislating by hypothesis', the case for TBLT can still be made.

Problems in implementing TBLT

The objections to TBLT considered in the previous section were theoretical and empirical in nature. Widdowson, Seedhouse, Sheen, and Swan have challenged the theoretical basis for TBLT and/or argued that there is insufficient empirical evidence to support it. Their criticisms are unjustified, as I have attempted to show. However, teachers face a number of practical difficulties in implementing TBLT, as a number of evaluations and as my own experience of working with teachers have shown. These practical problems are real, and will need to be addressed if TBLT is to be made to work in actual classrooms. I will begin by briefly examining two evaluation studies, one of which found that teachers largely failed to implement TBLT successfully and the other reported a more effective uptake of the approach.

Carless (2004) examined the implementation of TBLT in the context of Hong Kong's 'target-oriented curriculum' in elementary schools. Carless addressed two research questions: (1) What are the teachers' attitudes and understandings toward TBLT? and (2) How are the teachers attempting to implement TBLT and what issues emerge from these attempts? He collected data by means of 17 classroom observations for each of three native-speaking Cantonese teachers, six semi-structured interviews, and and the use of an attitude scale. The data were analysed qualitatively and the results presented in terms of representative classroom episodes for each teacher. He concluded that overall the teachers demonstrated a poor understanding of what a task was and that, as a result, the tasks they employed resulted in 'practice' rather then genuine communication. He noted three key issues in the implementation of the tasks: (1) wide use of the students' mother tongue, (2) discipline challenges (i.e. there was a tension between the need to get the students talking and the need to maintain class discipline, (3) many of the tasks resulted in non-linguistic activity, such as drawing, rather than use of the L2 as there was little L2 production. It was clear that overall the task-based approach was not working effectively in this teaching context.

McDonough and Chaikitmongkol (2007) reported on an innovative task-based course for students at Chiang Mai University in Thailand. The course replaced a traditional focus-on-forms course and was developed by the teachers involved in the programme. It included a learning-strategies component and, in addition to the self-made task-based materials, utilized a supplementary commercial textbook. The evaluation addressed two research

questions: (1) What were the teachers' and students' reactions to a task-based course? and (2) What concerns (if any) did the teachers have about the course? A variety of data were collected by means of open-ended questions about the tasks, a notebook kept by the students, observation of the teachers, a final course evaluation consisting of open-ended questions, interviews with the students and teachers, and field notes kept by one of the teachers participating in the course. McDonough and Chaikitmongkol considered both the teacher and learner reactions to the course, reporting that it resulted in (1) increased learner independence, (2) some concern among the teachers about the lack of grammar (although this dissipated as the course progressed), and (3) the students' recognition that the course was relevant to their real-world academic needs but not to their needs outside the academic context. McDonough and Chaikitmongkol also reported how the course designers attempted to address the participants' concerns by (1) undertaking revisions to help both teachers and students adjust to the course, (2) providing learner support (e.g. developing supplementary materials to help students understand the task assignments), and (3) reducing the number of activities in the course. Overall, this task-based course was a success.

It is pertinent to ask why the Hong Kong elementary programme was relatively unsuccessful and the Chiang Mai course more successful. There are many possible reasons. The elementary students in the Hong Course had very limited English proficiency, whereas the university students had a substantial grounding in English. The teachers in the Hong Kong course were not directly involved in developing the tasks they taught, whereas the university teachers were. The Hong Kong teachers lacked a clear understanding of what a task was, whereas the university teachers clearly understood what constituted a task. There was no built-in opportunity for the Hong Kong teachers to revise the materials used in the course, whereas there was for the university teachers.

These differences point to a number of principles that, if followed, may help to ameliorate the problems that arise in the implementation of TBLT. These principles are:

1. The tasks must be tailored to the proficiency levels of the students (e.g. if the students have limited proficiency, tasks should initially be of the input-providing rather than output-prompting kind).
2. Tasks need to be trialled to ensure that they result in appropriate L2 use and revised in the light of experience.
3. For TBLT to work, teachers need a clear understanding of what a task is.
4. Teachers and students need to be made aware of the purpose and rationale for performing tasks (e.g. they need to understand that tasks cater to incidental learning of the kind that will facilitate their communicative skills).
5. Ideally, the teachers involved in teaching a task-based course must be involved in the development of the task materials.

Such principles, however, are arguably relevant not just to TBLT but to any form of teaching. They speak to the importance of teacher involvement in course development and to teacher education. They underlie the successful implementation of any innovation in language teaching (see e.g. Ellis 1997 and Rea-Dickens and Germaine 2000).

There are, however, more structural impediments to TBLT that cannot be so easily addressed. Educational systems in many parts of the world place the emphasis on knowledge-learning rather than skill development, and a task-based approach to language teaching is not readily compatible with such a philosophy. A structural approach based on teaching discrete items of language accords more closely with such an educational philosophy. TBLT calls for the use of performance-based testing, but in many educational contexts examinations test knowledge rather than skills, and teachers will understandably feel the need to tailor their teaching to such examinations. Arguably, too, TBLT is not easily implemented in large classes – a structural feature of many educational contexts. Solutions to these impediments to TBLT require a radical review of the educational philosophy and resources that underpin teachers' classrooms. Such a review entails a shift in educational policy, and is unlikely to be undertaken readily.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to address a number of criticisms of TBLT, arguing that they constitute misunderstandings and misrepresentations of both its theoretical rationale and its methodology. I shall conclude with what I see as the advantages of a task-based approach:

1. TBLT offers the opportunity for 'natural' learning inside the classroom.
2. It emphasizes meaning over form but can also cater for learning form.
3. It affords learners a rich input of target language.
4. It is intrinsically motivating.
5. It is compatible with a learner-centred educational philosophy but also allows for teacher input and direction.
6. It caters to the development of communicative fluency while not neglecting accuracy.
7. It can be used alongside a more traditional approach.

I also identified a number of practical problems, and advanced a set of principles that may go some way to ensuring the successful implementation of a task-based course. Finally, I acknowledge that there may be more serious structural difficulties relating to the nature of educational systems and that these cannot be so easily addressed, although it is surely important to try.

It remains to acknowledge one final and more compelling objection to TBLT. Some language educators have advanced a social critique, arguing

that there is no single approach to language teaching that should be adopted in all teaching contexts. Widdowson (1993), for example, cited an unpublished study by Scollon and Scollon suggesting that 'conversational methods' are antithetical to the Confucian emphasis on benevolence and respect between teacher and students in China. He views TBLT as implying a particular cultural context that may be in conflict with cultural contexts where learning is not seen as a collaborative and experiential activity. From this perspective, the classroom practices required by TBLT can be seen as culturally loaded, requiring the democratic, egalitarian discourses that are seen as desirable in the West and the advocacy of which Pennycook (1994) sees as cultural imperialism. While these criticisms are overstated (i.e. TBLT, as I have pointed out, is not just a matter of 'conversational methods'), it must be accepted that there may cultural barriers to the uptake of TBLT. Clearly, no matter how convincing a case can be made for TBLT on psycholinguistic grounds, social and cultural factors may make it difficult (perhaps impossible) to implement in some contexts. There is no easy resolution to this dilemma.

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